

Livable
Places
Profile



Leimert Park



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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
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Mobile Source
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Review Committee



History

Leimert Park was developed by Walter H. Leimert Sr., a real estate developer who purchased 240 acres of land known as Rancho Cienega O Pao de la Tijera in the early 1920's. He envisioned a development project which was to become a planned unit development, including single and multiple family dwellings, a retail center, a school, and a park. In 1925 Walter Leimert commissioned Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., the designer of New York's Central Park for the design of Leimert Park. It was one of the City's first planned communities.

Centrally located seven miles southwest of downtown Los Angeles and within the Crenshaw community, Leimert Park Village is a transit, and pedestrian-oriented livable community, meaning residents can easily access goods and services by transit and walking. It is a village in the middle of an expansive urban setting. Leimert Park is the most visible center of African-American heritage and culture in the City of Los Angeles. It is a community of jazz venues, Afro-centric clothing, gift stores, art galleries, dance studios, and restaurants, in addition to a variety of neighborhood-serving retail businesses. The community is roughly bounded by Crenshaw on the west, Vernon Avenue to the south, Leimert Boulevard on the east, and 43rd Street on the north.

Leimert Park Village is readily accessible by public transportation and major boulevards that connect to the freeway network surrounding Los Angeles.



The centerpiece of Leimert Park, and acting as a strong physical anchor in the neighborhood,

is the architecturally distinct, 1940's-era Leimert Theater, renamed the Vision Theatre. In front of the theater lies the Leimert Park Plaza, designed in the 1920's by the architectural firm of Olmsted & Olmsted, designers of New York City's Central Park. With its operating fountain, Leimert Park Plaza is a distinctly designed open space within this urban area. With its angled parking, wide sidewalks and sidewalk furniture, and interesting store fronts, Leimert Park Village is a pedestrian friendly environment. The original design remains highly functional today as shoppers, tourists, and shop owners maintain a steady stream of traffic to the village for shopping, browsing, dining, special events, and festivals. The Vision Theater towers over a commercial area which meets the many daily needs and services of the surrounding residential area.

The surrounding residential community consists of an attractive collection of multi-family and single family homes, some of which are actually next door and across the street from the Village's commercial area, and all are well within walking distance. The mix of residences provides an attractive collection of homes whose architecture is inspired Spanish and Mediterranean styles.



Despite buildings in the Village being damaged during the 1992 civil unrest, and years of economic disinvestment, the community has largely rebuilt itself into a destination now frequented by the Southern Californians in search of weekend jazz and blues, and other cultural activities. The Leimert Park Village has sustained itself economically, as evidenced by continued activity of the Leimert Park Merchant's Association. Regardless of this vitality, the Leimert Park Village area is over 60 years old, and the residents saw the need to make improvements and thus began working hard to renovate and revitalize their community.



The goal of this profile is to demonstrate how communities can undertake an integrated planning process to implement transportation and community development initiatives leading to quality of life and environmental benefits. The

Leimert Park improvements were built upon active citizen participation in planning for community and transportation investments. Leimert Park revitalization efforts demonstrate an active community involvement process necessary to identify a common vision, and to develop a strategic plan which facilitates revitalization of a historically livable community.



Rebuilding in a Transit Oriented Neighborhood

Rebuilding Through Community Transportation Planning

The Mayor's Office of the City of Los Angeles developed the concept for LANI (Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative) after the 1992 civil unrest to provide an economic stimulus to eight transit-dependent neighborhoods through community planned transportation improvements, housing, commercial rehabilitation, and development. Leimert Park was chosen as one of the original eight neighborhoods for a 30-month LANI demonstration project. Neighborhoods were evaluated to identify those with the greatest chance for success. Leimert Park was chosen because of its access to transit and high transit-dependent population, underutilization of its main streets, and demand for affordable housing and neighborhood retail. Furthermore, Leimert Park had existing community organizations and some level of planning work already in place; these factors were considered important for short-term success.

The first goal of the LANI demonstration project was to establish a permanent community organization and to provide technical assistance sup-



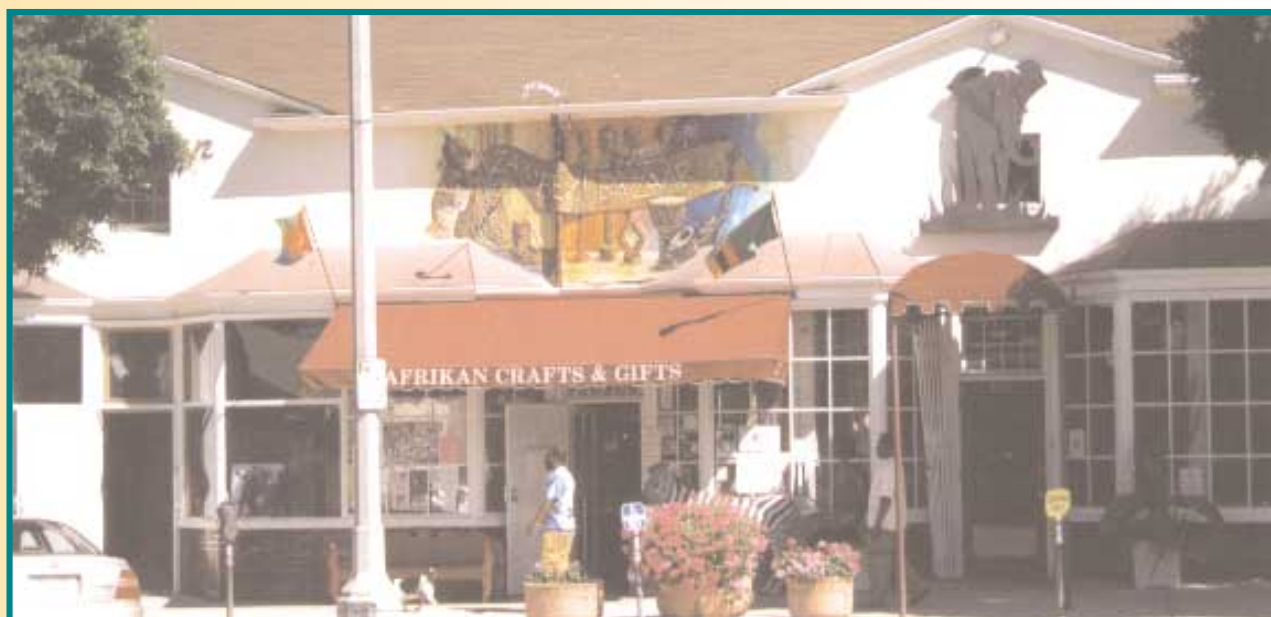


port,
training
and funding.

In December 1994, local residents and organizations completed work plans that described programs and projects to be implemented. This work plan drew from the City of Los Angeles' West Adams Plan to "promote an arrangement of land uses, streets, and services which will encourage and contribute to the economic, social and physical health, safety, welfare and convenience of the people who live and work in the Plan area." In 1994, LANI began the Leimert Park Village Demonstration Project, the first phase of which

produced specific transit related amenities that were designed to help spark a transformation in the community. At the end of the 2-year demonstration period, local organizations were expected to have the capacity to become permanent vehicles for community revitalization. By 1995, they hired design consultants and began construction of the initial demonstration projects. The project has resulted in the construction of bus shelters with matching benches, and information kiosks. In addition, dozens of trees have been planted, decorative trash receptacles and flower pots have been placed in the Village, and banners and light fixtures have been designed and installed to give the Leimert Park Village a revitalized "sense of place."

With funding from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), LANI has leveraged more than \$1 million in local government money to fund various aspects of the Leimert Park demonstration project (over \$5 million total). The City's Department of Parks and Recreation contributed \$600,000 to upgrade the Leimert Park Plaza. The Community Redevelopment Agency donated \$285,000 to pay for needed street work, including adding decorative paving and bump outs, and \$800,000 was granted by the local city council office for re-striping and improving lighting in parking lots and to add landscaping.





Creating a Vision, a Plan, and Moving Toward Success

The Leimert Park Village Community Development Corporation (LPV CDC) was established as a result of the Leimert Park Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative as a permanent vehicle to facilitate economic and social development in Leimert Park Village. Its mission is to nurture and celebrate arts from an African-American perspective, to promote the economic well-being of the Leimert Park Village through an organized effort, to stimulate public investment in business, to create jobs, and to promote transit access and construction of physical neighborhood amenities to improve pedestrian space. The LPV CDC has identified six key targets to help accomplish its mission:

- ▲ **NEIGHBORHOOD TRANSFORMATION**
Concentrated, high profile upgrades, including transit and pedestrian access.
- ▲ **COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT**
Establish a Business Improvement District (BID) to recruit new businesses, and develop capital.
- ▲ **JOB DEVELOPMENT**
New job opportunities via the BID, along with other pending loan and investment programs.
- ▲ **COMMUNITY ORGANIZING**
Increased involvement of local community organizations in planning, monitoring, and implementation.
- ▲ **SECURITY**
Brighter lights, renovated parking lots.
- ▲ **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPERATION OPERATION**
Continue to develop the Village through creation and implementation of a strategic plan.

Neighborhood Transformation

Creating the Vision

The LPVCDC programs that focus on physical high-profile upgrades (street lighting, building facades, park redesign, public improvements) will create an outward manifestation of the neighborhood transformation. Following are the highlights of the vision for the physical transformation of Leimert Park:

- ▲ Pedestrian street lighting will be increased by 100% within the Village and around the perimeter of the Village contributing greatly to the feeling of security in the Village.
- ▲ 40% or more of the business frontages in the Village will be upgraded in the new Facade Renovation program.
- ▲ Leimert Park Plaza and Village renovation will be completed within a two-year time frame. A well used, well-lighted park will contribute to the feeling of security in the Village.
- ▲ Access improvements will be inviting to pedestrians and regulate the movement of automobiles through the Village.

These upgrades will not only be evident in the physical appearance of the Village but will be seen in the increase of shopper and tourist traffic, in residents using the park, and the increased variety of offerings among the shops, restaurants and retail establishments. A growing, stable commercial area is essential for property owners. These improvements are important not only for community pride, but to provide needed services for residents. Residents want to see their money stay in their community, enrich their own tax base, and enhance their quality of life.



Developing and Implementing a Plan

The LPV CDC has already accomplished a wide variety of projects since its inception under LANI and since graduating to the status of an independent organization. It has initiated a number of programs to carry out its mission. These programs include the following: Public Improvement Project (Streetscape), Commercial Facade Program, Pedestrian Lighting Program, Leimert Park Plaza Restoration Program, Transit Information Center, and a Business Improvement District. These programs are already transforming the community according to the overall strategic plan.

Public Streetscape Improvement Project

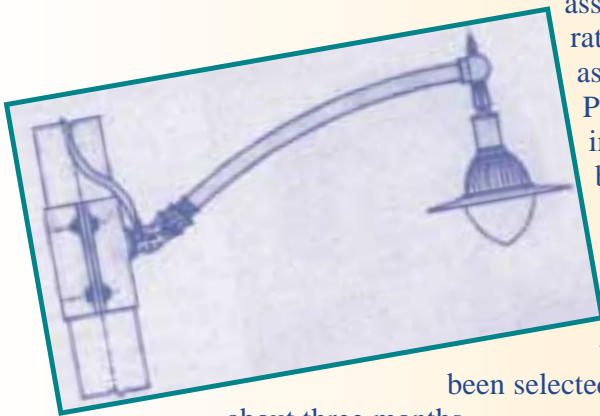
Over \$280,000 has been allocated by the Los Angeles CRA for streetscape improvements within Leimert Park Village, including a "Jazz Walk of Fame," as well as improvements to control automobile traffic and ease pedestrian access. These improvements are expected to be completed in about eight months.

Commercial Facade Program

The Commercial Facade program is in the start-up phase; the program is ready to provide grants to property and business owners to improve the exterior of their buildings. The Grant Program has been approved and is ready to issue bids for architectural design and construction. The City of Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) has made \$500,000 available for this program to enhance the physical appearance of the Village. A kick-off meeting was held on September 8th; all design and construction is expected to be complete in eight months also.

Pedestrian Lighting

In December 1998, property owners voted to approve (with 85% of the votes), a lighting assessment district. This was the highest approval rating ever in the City of Los Angeles for such an assessment. It will ensure implementation of the Pedestrian Lighting Program. The improved lighting will mean more people are likely to visit and browse, and thus increase business for local merchants. The fixtures will be placed on all of the light poles throughout the Village including those on pedestrian walkways, in parking lots, and in Leimert Park Plaza. This will increase the lighting level by 100 percent. Designs have been selected, and the lighting is expected to be installed in about three months.



Leimert Park Plaza Restoration

Leimert Park plays host to more festivals than any other park in Los Angeles. This heavy use, however, has taken its toll. This renovation project is intended to create a modern plaza that will be a cornerstone of the Village and attract pedestrian traffic, better handle crowds and special events, and improve security. The historic fountain will be preserved and refurbished; palm trees will be planted at key locations as part of a gateway into the Village; and more attractive benches and seating will be installed. Old and distressed trees will be removed and landscaping improvements will be made. As part of the restoration effort, a community re-orientation effort will be made to promote the use of the revived park. Renovations began in December, 1998. Thus far, decorative benches and picnic/game tables have been installed, and a new restroom facility is being built. Completion is expected early in 2000.

Corporation as a model illustrating how to get involvement from “everyone-not just the government, but also the people who live and work in a community.” Leimert Park was commended for going beyond other communities in their improvement efforts by creating the Community Development Corporation which has become independent of LANI. Ms. Jeff noted efforts to improve links to transit, make improvements at the neighborhood scale, and to involve the community in the decision-making process.

Economic & Job Development Take Root

The vision of Leimert Park as an example of entrepreneurial activity and economic development is being realized. Commercial and residential development has developed in the community, new businesses have come to life, and job training efforts are preparing future workers in the community. Currently, the Leimert Park Village is home to over 125 businesses. A stable, growing commercial area is essential for property owners and residents in the community.

Community Build, Inc., a non-profit corporation, and the building's developer will complete a new office building some time near Fall 1999. The facility will feature luxury office suites, retail space and a courtyard, and will be on the site of a building destroyed during the 1992 civil unrest. Also, new businesses are growing here. One of the new retailers in Leimert Park is “Stranger”, which specializes in African clothing for women. The Senegalese owner, it is reported, feels that his location is in the center of African American culture and thus is perfectly located to do well and benefit the community. On top of this, Leimert Park Village became the new home of Babe's and Ricky's, the oldest blues club in Los Angeles. The owner, Laura Mae Gross nurtures a variety of music and culture with acts from throughout the nation. For this, Babe's and Rickey's has been called a “neighborhood bar for the whole world” in a recent magazine article. One other special mention is Images Arise'n. As an office supply and business service company started over ten



Community Build, Inc. building in progress...



...almost complete.

years ago, Images Arise'n is dedicated to serving the Leimert Park and surrounding areas. Images Arise'n serves the community not only as a business, but also as a job training center. The company has been selected by the Los Angeles Urban League to provide their program trainees with internships.

Leimert Park Homes- Commitment to Housing and Infill

In addition to new commercial development, new residential development has been built to fill-in vacant urban land. This “infill” project brings much needed new housing to the urban community. On a half-acre site previously occupied by a fire-damaged grocery store, Michael Anderson of



Anderson
Development

Company used funds from the Los Angeles Housing Department Small Site Development Program and the Community Redevelopment Agency to develop six “urban cottages” nestled within the existing housing and commercial mix. The Leimert Park Homes developers are targeting first-time home buyers and offering them traditional two-story row houses with front porches. Federal and local assistance will allow families to have mortgages at around \$600 a month. These types of infill development projects increase home ownership within Leimert Park Village’s low-income community.

Community Involvement & Public Participation- A Foundation

Civic Involvement

As with any successful community development effort, public participation and community involvement are essential ingredients. The manner by which Leimert Park improvements are coming to fruition is no exception. Planning by the City of Los Angeles, LANI, the CRA, and the LPVDCD has been based in community involvement. A web of community groups has been woven to provide a broad source of community involvement.

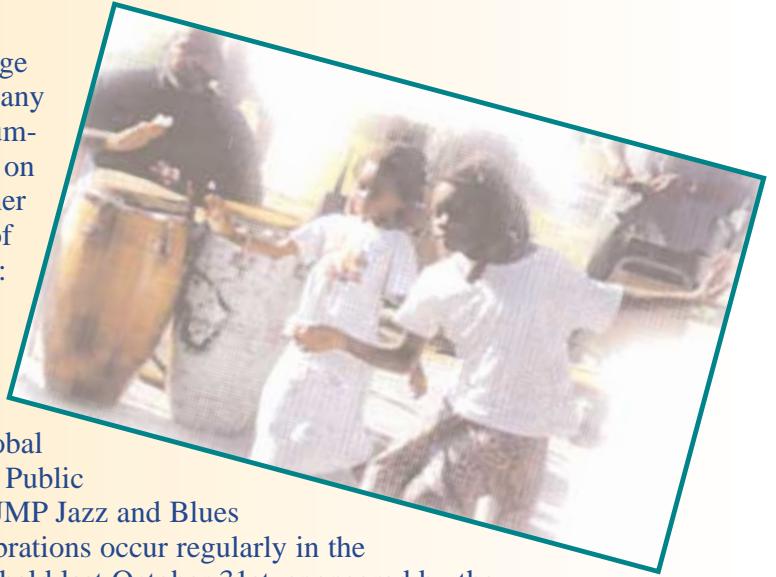
While the LPVDCD has graduated out of the LANI program, the Board of the LPVDCD continues to collaborate with LANI, providing information, suggestions on new programs, training and consultation. At the same time LANI leadership recognizes the LPVDCD as an important tool in achieving LANI program goals. Because the City of Los Angeles' Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) has recognized LPVDCD as a stable and responsible organization, CRA has authorized LPVDCD to manage programs, and consults with LPVDCD board and staff. This relationship will keep the LPVDCD in the forefront of new development for the City of Los Angeles. In addition to the CRA, the Eighth Council District and its Councilman, Mark Ridley-Thomas, have worked closely with LPVDCD to ensure development continues. The district staff assists LPVDCD to traverse the City bureaucracy and to keep projects moving, and also provides information on new funding and programs opportunities for the community. Also, the citizen's group that advises the councilman on community concerns, the Eighth District Empowerment Congress, provides advisory input to

LPVDCD programs and plans with respect to impacts on the residents in the community. Other community groups that LPVDCD has a partnership with include the Leimert Park Village Merchant's Association; this relationship helps to keep and grow jobs and businesses in Leimert Park. In addition, the residents of Leimert Park are directly involved in the planning and programs of the LPVDCD through community meetings on specific projects and programs.

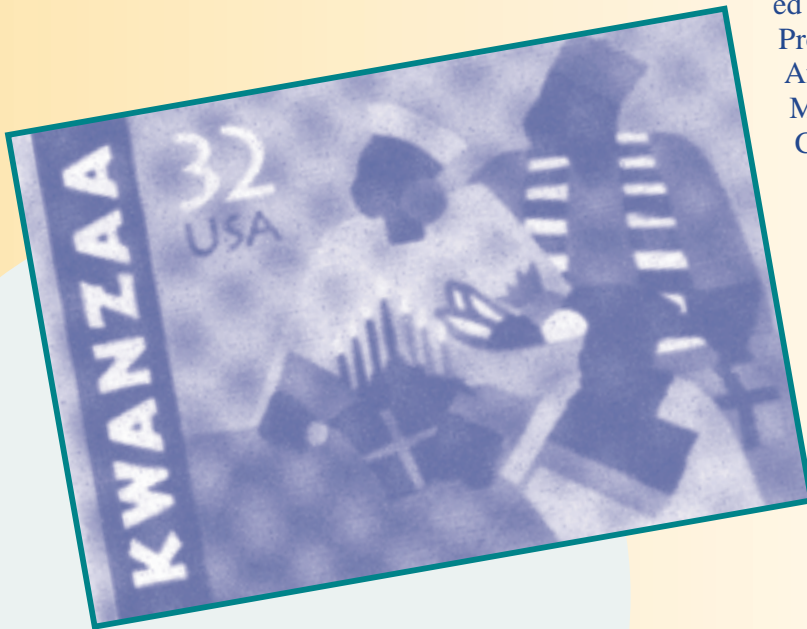


Community Celebrations & Activities

Leimert Park Plaza at the center of the village holds more festivals or cultural events than any other park in the City of Los Angeles. A number of events bring the community together on a regular basis and bring in people from other areas within the region as well as the City of Los Angeles. Some of these events include: Kwanza celebrated in December, as well as other seasonal festivals sponsored by Kwanza People of Color, and the Annual Leimert Park Jazz Festival, which is held in September. In addition, as part of the global celebration of "Sacred Music in Sacred and Public Places," conceived by the Dalai Lama, the JMP Jazz and Blues Festival was held in June 1999. Other celebrations occur regularly in the Village, such as the Harvest Moon Festival held last October 31st, sponsored by the Elephant Walk, a restaurant in Leimert Park Village. Also, celebrations near Leimert Park are supported by the community, such as the Juneteenth



Festival which celebrates freedom initiated by the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Annual Pan African Film and Art Festival held at the Magic Johnson Theatres in the Crenshaw community.



Lessons To Be Learned

Historically unique architecture and urban design are building blocks

Historical architecture and the existing livable urban designs provide a sense of identity and stimulate community and cultural pride on which to re-build and revitalize. For example, there is a plan to erect a historical statue in the Leimert Park to celebrate community pride.

Revitalization should capitalize on local assets

Pride in culture and community is a key local asset as important as architecture and urban design features. Revitalization efforts can take advantage of these assets to create a comprehensive vision and gain complete community involvement.

Pedestrian-oriented for environmental and commercial benefits

Making an area safer and more attractive for pedestrians creates customers.

Community participation, ownership, and empowerment are essentials

People can empower themselves through partnership with local government to improve the economic health and quality of life. Building on the commercial area that exists, maintaining

stability, and growing the community's local commercial base is real economic health, empowerment and an enhancement to the quality of life

Community celebrations and activities foster continued community energy

Community celebrations and activities are an important aspect of community participation. They bring the local community together to make it an enjoyable place to live and celebrate life's events, and they bring people from other areas to experience the community, and perhaps even spend money.

Public "seed money" can produce private investment

With a comprehensive strategic plan, public "seed money" can be targeted and thus wisely spent to generate private investments.

Sustainability is the key

The importance of having an organization in place to continue to generate revenue and oversee continued revitalization efforts is critical.

ABOUT THE PROFILE

This profile is sponsored by the Land Use Education Program of the Mobile Source Air Reduction Review Committee. The goal of this program is to show how cities and their regions can undertake an integrated planning process to implement transportation, air quality and land use development initiatives leading to quality of life and environmental benefits. The Southern California Association of Governments prepared this profile for the Mobile Source Air Reduction Review Committee with funds authorized under AB 2766.

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